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Rebecca Crouch Papers

1878-1893

1 box (0.5 linear ft.)

Call no.: MS 602



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In the late 1870s, a middle-aged farmer from Richmond, Minnesota, Samuel Crouch, married a woman eleven years his junior and asked her to relocate to the northern plains. Possessed of some solid self-confidence, Rebecca left behind her family and friends and set out to make a life for herself, adjusting to her new role as step-mother and community member, as well as the familiar role of family member at a distance.

The Crouch Papers includes approximately 225 letters offering insight into life in Minnesota during the late 1870s and early 1880s, and into the domestic and social life of a woman entering into a new marriage with an older man. Rebecca's letters are

consumed with the ebb and flow of daily life, her interactions with other residents of the community at church or in town, the weather, and chores from cooking to cleaning, farming, gardening, writing, going to town, or rearranging furniture.

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Background on Rebecca Crouch

Rebecca Crouch (b. ca.1840), Beck to her friends and family, moved to Richmond, Minnesota, in the late 1870s to take up a fresh start with her new husband Samuel (b. ca.1829) and his son from a previous marriage, Willie (b. ca.1865). Until that point, Beck's family, which included her parents and siblings Sam and Emma, was not firmly rooted, having ties to Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, while her sister Emma lived in Tennessee. Sarah Jones, a relative, initially joined Beck in Minnesota, but returned to the east to tend to her ailing father.

Having reached Richmond in fine fashion by train, Beck was excited to be in a new place, far further west than she had ever been. There, she and her husband purchased a large farm near Mantorville, approximately seventeen miles from Rochester, and soon settled into life in the small community. With her self-confidence and a personality that no one could resist, according to her, she became the light of the area, maintaining a respectable social reputation while keeping a busy schedule. Her duties included being a wife and mother, member of church committee, and a seamstress, which seems to have been her primary job, but she was also an avid gardener and of course, she carried on a lively correspondence with her dear family back home. Beck had promised her mother a letter twice a week, and though at times, she professed to being so overwhelmed by work that she could not write, she made up for any gaps on the following days, usually with an apology and a remark about her readers having to bear a day without a letter from their dear Rebecca.

Beck's self confidence -- or high self opinion -- emerged in a number of different ways. When visiting her stepson's class one day, embarrassing him thoroughly in the process, she crowed over the fact that the teacher reported a drastic improvement in Willie's work since Beck had come to live with them, and even more that the teacher "did not like Willie before Beck was in his life, but now she thinks that he is a very nice young man." In a less favorable light, Beck's self-confidence could lead to harsh judgments of others. She regularly criticized her relative Hattie, who she says "is lazy and will not make a good wife," and she was equally critical of her Norwegian servant who she also considered "lazy." Beck would rather do the work herself, she wrote, than have her servant do it, and besides, she was certain that Norwegians "play dirty tricks" and it is "so hard to break them in."

Although she was used to the harsh winters of New England, Beck found the climate of the upper Midwest almost comically unendurable. In letter after letter to her family, she complained that the weather is the worst people have seen in twenty years. At one point, in a three letter span she says this is the worst day they had ever had, and while she insists that this day could be no worse, the next letter only unravels more tortures. Beck's dramatic assessments of her surroundings lends a dark humor to her reports that people in Sleepy Eye, Minn., and the Dakotas were freezing or starving to death.

Eleven years older than Beck, and previously married, Samuel was quite a contrast to his wife. Crouch owned a relatively large farm, large enough that he had several of his sons helping him out, though Beck wrote "they are not worth half as much as him or Mr. Bessey," Crouch's right hand man. "His oldest boy gets seventeen dollars," Beck complained, "and that price is not justified to his work." For all the hard work he put in, however, and for all his success, Beck complained regularly that he failed in one important task: writing to her parents. While she complained that "it is so hard to find time to write," even while she scribbled away, Samuel simply refused to get out a pen and pad. In several of her letters, Beck described her husband asleep at her side in the living room, seated in a chair, out for the night. Not writing.

Beck's sister Emma had at least three children, two boys (Julius and Percy) and a girl (Jessie), and her family appears to have been quite prosperous -- Emma reported that he husband earned twenty-thousand dollars a year. Like Rebecca, Emma did needlework in addition to raising her children, and she was a member of the community in Fairmont, Tenn.

Scope of collection

The Crouch Papers includes approximately 225 letters offering insight into life in Minnesota during the late 1870s and early 1880s, and into the domestic and social life of a woman entering into a new marriage with an older man. Rebecca's letters are consumed with the ebb and flow of daily life, her interactions with other residents of the community at church or in town, the weather, and chores from cooking to cleaning, farming, gardening, writing, going to town, or rearranging furniture.

Above all, perhaps, Rebecca's letters reflect the importance of family. Her concern for her siblings and elderly parents, illnesses and death, occupy her attention, and no matter how busy she was, no matter how deep the snow or how little news there was to report, she always made an effort to reach out to her family. The letters alone are a never ending circle of word and news, having one person reporting to another on a letter they received, with a deeply personal note that transcends the writing. Letters were a bridge that allowed Beck to live away from her family, yet never be far away.

The letters from Rebecca's sister Emma are similarly rooted in community and family, with reports about flowers blooming, people coming down with smallpox or boils, and a massive rain which had brought a flood, mixed with accounts of her sons obtaining their first jobs and her daughter, Jessie's progress as a young girl. Both sisters were concerned about what to do to care for their aging parents, with Emma hinting that Beck should take them in.

The Crouch letters also offer insight into more general social changes in the United States. A long running dispute over trespassing on the Crouch farm, resolved in the courtroom, the improvements in transport and travel, the geographic mobility of Beck's family, and the roles of men and women at home and in the workplace.

Inventory

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

1878

6 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

1880

18 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

1881 Jan.-Mar.

22 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

1881 Apr.-July

17 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

1881 Aug.-Sept.

8 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

1881 Oct.-Dec.

16 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

1882 Jan.-Feb.

8 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

1882 Apr.-Sept.

10 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

1882 Oct.-Dec.

14 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

1883

24 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

Undated

12 items

Crouch, Rebecca: Letters

Undated

14 items

Letters addressed to Rebecca Crouch

1882-1883

13 items

Loomis, Emma: Letters

1879-1882

14 items

Jones, Sarah: Letters

1881-1883

7 items

Miscellaneous Letters

1881-1882

11 items

Miscellaneous Letters

1885-1893

11 items

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Gift of Margot Culley.

Processing Information

Processed by Joel Nilles, April 2009.

Language:

English

Copyright and Use (More information)

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Search terms

Subjects

Farmers--Minnesota

Minnesota--Social life and customs--19th century

Women--Minnesota

Contributors

Crouch, Rebecca. **[main entry]**

Crouch, Rebecca

Jones, Sarah

Loomis, Emma

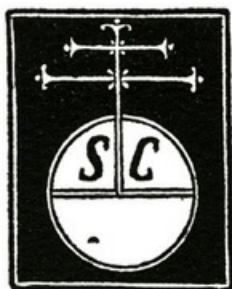
Genres and formats

Letters (Correspondence)

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